

MEMORIAL

Peter Gay (1923–2015)

PETER Gay died in Manhattan on May 12, 2015. A professor at Columbia and Yale, Gay was one of the preeminent cultural and intellectual historians of his generation. His enormous output of scholarship, on subjects as varied as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Sigmund Freud, Victorian sexuality and modernist art, testifies to the range of his erudition and his restless urge to make his views known. He was the recipient of numerous awards, honorary doctorates, and other distinctions, including the National Book Award in 1967 for *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, the Gold Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1996, and the Geschwister-Scholl-Preis in 1999. After retiring from Yale he became the founding Director of the New York Public Library's Center for Scholars and Writers, a post he held from 1997 to 2003. He remained extraordinarily productive as a scholar well into his eighties, publishing essays, articles, and books, including a massive history of modernism. His final book, *Why the Romantics Matter*, appeared last year.

Peter Joachim Fröhlich was born into a secularized Jewish family in Berlin in 1923. His father co-owned a firm that arranged for the manufacture of inexpensive versions of high-end porcelain and glassware, which were then sold in department stores and specialty shops. Described by Gay as a “self-made man,” Moritz Fröhlich was born in 1894 in the predominantly Polish village of Podjanze in Upper Silesia and received only an eighth-grade education before embarking on a business career.¹ Despite his middle-class standing, Gay's father was a lifelong supporter of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and a pronounced secularist, views he passed onto his son. Gay's mother Helga was born in Breslau in 1900 and married Fröhlich at the age of twenty-two. Peter, their only child, was born the following year. Gay would characterize himself as quiet and studious, a “a most tractable boy” who enjoyed playing alone and only rarely got into trouble.²

The rise of the National Socialists to power in 1933 overturned the Fröhlichs' middle-class existence and eventually forced them out of Germany. Peter, who was subjected to

¹See Peter Gay, *My German Question: Growing Up in Nazi Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 23; also see *Moritz Fröhlich—Morris Gay: A German Refugee in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, 1999). For an important overview of Gay's intellectual development, see Mark S. Micale and Robert L. Dietle, “Peter Gay: A Life in History,” in *Enlightenment, Passion, Modernity: Historical Essays in European Thought and Culture*, ed. Mark S. Micale and Robert L. Dietle (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000). I also benefited from reading Helmut Walser Smith's conference paper, “Reluctant Return: Peter Gay and the Cosmopolitan Work of a Historian,” which he generously supplied to me. This has since appeared in Andreas W. Daum, Hartmut Lehmann, and James J. Sheehan, eds., *The Second Generation: Emigrés from Nazi Germany as Historians* (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 210–28.

²Gay, *My German Question*, 32.

antisemitic taunts from his classmates, was eventually expelled from his *Gymnasium*; he went on to work as a dental assistant's apprentice. He coped in these years by retreating into the relative security of family life, as well as hobbies like stamp collecting and ardent sports fandom (Hertha BSC and Arsenal were his favorite football teams), but his attitude toward Germany and the Germans had hardened irrevocably. In 1936, when he and his father attended the Berlin Olympics, they celebrated the exploits of the American athletes and took each German victory as a "personal insult."³ By mid-1937, Gay's parents had formed a plan to move the family from Berlin to Florida, where an uncle lived with his American wife, but the events of 1938 ratcheted up the pressure even further. In July, Moritz Fröhlich's gentile business partner kicked him out of their firm without any compensation, forcing the family to live off their savings. This was followed by *Kristallnacht*, during which crowds destroyed the shops of two of Gay's uncles; a third was arrested and sent briefly to Sachsenhausen. Riding his bicycle through the streets of his Berlin neighborhood, the fifteen-year-old Gay was able to survey the damage caused by the German mobs. Years later he would describe it as the "catastrophe that deepened my rancor against Germany and Germans, already powerful enough, into an indiscriminate hatred that survived long stretches of time quite unabated."⁴

Gay's family was initially booked to leave Germany for Havana on May 13, 1939, aboard the ill-fated MS *St. Louis*. But Gay's father decided at the last moment that they should sail instead on the *Iberia*, which was leaving two weeks earlier. This entailed not only buying new tickets but also altering the date and ship name on the family's certificate of passage, a forgery Gay's father accomplished with precision and patience. He had already evaded the Nazi requirement that Jewish émigrés surrender their jewelry by taking a package filled with heavy but worthless material to the post office, where they declared it to be the family silver and jewels; instead, these items were left with a trusted gentile friend. With the necessary documents in hand and a few valuables packed in a small crate, Gay's family departed from Hamburg on April 27, 1939, and arrived in Havana two weeks later. Once in Cuba, all thoughts turned to the United States. They lived, Gay would write, "sitting on their suitcases," waiting for an entry visa to America.⁵ In the meantime, Gay explored the entertainments of Havana and worked on his English, polishing his prose at the Havana Business Academy (to which he received a scholarship) and devouring American periodicals like *Time*, *Collier's*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. Finally, after a year and a half in Cuba, Gay's family received their visas: "On January 10, 1941, I stepped on American soil for the first time, at Key West. Berlin seemed far away, but that was an illusion; for years I would pick fragments of it from my skin as though I had wallowed among shards of broken glass."⁶

The transition to the United States was by no means easy. Gay's mother, often in poor health and now suffering from tuberculosis, was sent for treatment to the National Jewish Hospital in Denver, bringing the whole family along with her. In Denver, Gay's father embarked on a number of ventures (e.g., selling clothes, dealing stamps), but was never able to establish himself again as a successful businessman. The family's straitened financial situation forced Peter to drop out of high school and go to work as a shipping clerk at a cap factory (he was eventually fired by his employer for participating in a unionization campaign). Despite

³Ibid., 81.

⁴Ibid., 133.

⁵Ibid., 159.

⁶Ibid., 167.

these troubles, Gay's family embraced their new homeland. They had no patience for those immigrants they called the "Byunksis," who complained that "*bei uns in Deutschland war alles besser*" (everything was better back home in Germany) and failed to appreciate the advantages of life in the United States. Just weeks after arriving in Colorado, Gay's family applied for American citizenship, and, following the example of a cousin who had immigrated several years earlier, they Americanized their first, middle, and last names. It was in this way that Peter Joachim Fröhlich became Peter Jack Gay.

In 1943, Gay began studies at the University of Denver on a full scholarship. This was made possible by the intervention of Gay's former high school English teacher, Helen Hunter, who worked out a plan to allow Gay to finish his high school degree by completing a private course with her on William Shakespeare. Once enrolled, Gay became a philosophy major and took part in several programs for high-achieving students. He wrote a column on politics for the university newspaper that was titled "The Gay Outlook." He even ran for student body president, losing by only six votes to a star of the football team. Meanwhile, he continued to work nights, weekends, and summers, selling shirts, manning cash registers, serving ice cream. Looking back years later, Gay considered it fortuitous that he had spent these early years in "Middle America," in a place where it was possible to escape the concerns of the German immigrant community and become fully (or at least mostly) "Americanized."

Gay moved to New York in 1946 to begin graduate study at Columbia University in the School of Public Law and Government (he turned down an offer from Harvard because its financial terms were too meager). After earning his Ph.D. at Columbia, he went on to serve as an instructor there, teaching courses on American government, political theory, and other topics. In 1952, he published *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism: Eduard Bernstein's Challenge to Marx*, a revised version of his dissertation and, one could argue, a statement of his basic political orientation. In Gay's study, Bernstein is very much the hero, the reformer who sought to free the ethical core of Marxism from its encrustation in Hegelian metaphysics and reconcile socialism's vision of equality with the political institutions of parliamentarism and democracy. The choice of Bernstein reflected Gay's rejection of both the Stalinist left and the McCarthyite right; it was also a rebuff to those of his colleagues and acquaintances who had migrated from one political extreme to the other—typically from the far left to the far right: "I felt fortunate in being immune from what I took to be an often willful political blindness of two warring groups who disputed their ground at New York cocktail parties and on the Wellfleet beaches. The one group made me decide that anti-Americanism was becoming the anti-Semitism of the intellectuals; the other, that the patriotic protestations of repentant radicals had all the marks of the self-indulgent orgy of the prodigal son coming home."⁷

Gay remained fundamentally optimistic regarding American political institutions, even if his worldview was shaped crucially by intellectuals—many of them also German-Jewish émigrés—whose views of America were hardly naïve or uncritical. One of them was his doctoral advisor, Franz Neumann, a former associate of the Frankfurt School best known among historians for *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (1944), but who spent his last years exploring the possibility of a liberal-democratic order that would take account of the social and economic concerns raised by Karl Marx and other radical critics of capitalism (i.e., precisely the preoccupations that animated Gay's book on Bernstein). Another was Herbert Marcuse, a close friend of Neumann whom Gay described "as one of the most amusing

⁷Peter Gay, "At Home in America," *The American Scholar* 46, no. 1 (Winter, 1977): 40.

people I have ever known.”⁸ Marcuse not only helped persuade Gay to take Freud seriously, but also to see his view of human nature as fundamentally pessimistic, such that its unpleasant features were unlikely to disappear in a postcapitalist society.⁹ On this reading, Freud was “a liberal in revolutionary’s clothes.”¹⁰

In 1952 Gay switched departmental homes at Columbia from political science, which failed to offer him a tenure-track position, to history, which did. Here Gay benefitted from the support of Henry Roberts, a specialist in Eastern European history, and Richard Hofstadter, a supremely accomplished American historian who had become Gay’s closest friend at Columbia. Hofstadter’s gifts as a stylist and as a polemicist, as well as his openness to recent developments in political sociology and psychoanalysis, made a deep impression on his younger colleague. Gay also found in Hofstadter an individual who shared his basic political sympathies, i.e., for a left liberalism that was fully aware of the limitations of capitalism but skeptical of utopian solutions, and that derided McCarthyism as a form of political “paranoia.” It was also at Columbia that Peter Gay married Ruth Slotkin, who brought with her three daughters from her previous marriage to Nathan Glazer. Although she never earned a doctorate, Ruth Gay would go on to write a series of well-received works on Jewish history, including *The Jews of Germany: A Historical Portrait* (1992), *Unfinished People: Eastern European Jews Encounter America* (1997), and *Safe Among the Germans: Liberated Jews After World War II* (2002). Over time, Peter Gay came to see her as an ally and partner in a common scholarly and intellectual enterprise.

Gay’s move to the discipline of history coincided with a growing interest in the Enlightenment. A 1954 essay, “The Enlightenment in the History of Political Theory,” provides insight into his early thinking on the topic. In this article, Gay identified a number of false and misleading accusations that had been leveled recently against the Enlightenment. These included the notions that the *philosophes* had had a quasi-religious faith in reason, that they had lacked a sense of history, and that they had believed progress was inevitable. Gay singled out the “New Conservatives” John Hallowell and Russell Kirk for promoting false and clichéd views of the Enlightenment.¹¹ But lurking behind their ideas he detected the unhealthy influence of Carl Becker’s *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932), a “witty and perverse little book, which has probably prevented more students from thinking about the Enlightenment than any other.”¹² Becker had argued that the *philosophes* were not nearly as modern as they (or subsequent historians) thought they were, since, in the end, they had simply reconstructed a medieval worldview using “more up-to-date materials.” The *philosophes*, Becker wrote, “renounced the authority of church and Bible, but exhibited a naïve faith in the authority of nature and reason. They scorned metaphysics, but were proud to be called philosophers... In spite of their rationalism and humane sympathies, in spite of their aversion to hocus-pocus and enthusiasm

⁸Peter Gay, “A Life of Learning,” ACLS Occasional Papers Nr. 58 (2004), 6.

⁹See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon, 1955), 238–74.

¹⁰Gay, “A Life of Learning,” 6.

¹¹Hallowell was the author of *The Decline of Liberalism as an Ideology, With Particular Reference to German Politico-Legal Thought* (London: Kegan Paul, 1946), as well as *Main Currents in Modern Political Thought* (New York: Henry Holt, 1950); Kirk, one of the founders of “traditionalist conservatism,” was the author of *The Conservative Mind, from Burke to Santayana* (Chicago: Regnery, 1953)

¹²Peter Gay, “The Enlightenment in the History of Political Theory,” *Political Science Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (1954): 378.

and dim perspectives... in spite of all of it, there is more of Christian philosophy in the writings of the *philosophes* than has yet been dreamt of in our histories.”¹³ A *truly* modern worldview, Becker argued, would have done away with all remnants of theology, including the *philosophes*’ beliefs in God, the afterlife, and the rational order of the universe.

Gay believed Becker’s thesis to be “sheer nonsense” and was determined to refute it.¹⁴ In his view, the Enlightenment attitude toward reason could hardly be described as one of naïve faith—to the contrary, the *philosophes* were well aware of the role of emotion in human affairs and had often stressed the power of love, greed, and fear to dictate actions, both for good and for ill. Indeed, some of the *philosophes*’ statements on sexual instincts anticipated the findings of Freud, “the greatest child of the Enlightenment which our century has known.”¹⁵ In a similar manner, Gay sought to vindicate the Enlightenment’s attitude toward history, arguing that its notions of historical causation and culture were far richer than previously acknowledged, and its conceptions of progress far more tentative, particularly given the *philosophes*’ less-than-rosy estimate of human nature. Above all, Gay objected to the notion, promoted by Becker and later by conservative scholars like Jacob Talmon, that the Enlightenment had simply replaced Christianity with a new faith or “secular religion.”¹⁶ This was a rhetorical move that was designed to delegitimize the Enlightenment by erasing precisely that which had made it a modern, secular phenomenon. Gay insisted, against this line of thought, that the *philosophes* had sought a truly scientific view of the world, grounded not in rationalist philosophy but rather in a skeptical empiricism whose results could be revised in light of new evidence and new information.¹⁷

Gay would later marvel at the youthful hubris on display in his 1954 essay, yet it contained the basic framework for all of his subsequent work on the Enlightenment.¹⁸ His initial plan was to write three volumes of essays covering a wide range of thinkers and writers, including Edward Gibbon, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Baron d’Holbach, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, and others. Instead, the planned first essay, on Voltaire, became a book unto itself. In *Voltaire’s Politics: The Poet as Realist* (1959), Gay attempted to demonstrate that almost all Voltaire’s writings, including his plays and histories, were informed by a desire to intervene in contemporary political affairs, but that the threat of censorship or even imprisonment had forced him to hide his intentions behind “vague, allusive generalities.”¹⁹

Gay’s approach to Voltaire—locating his writings in their contemporary political environment—formed the basis for what he came to call the “social history of ideas,” which he envisioned as an alternative to, on the one hand, Arthur Lovejoy’s form of intellectual

¹³Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1932), 30–31.

¹⁴Gay, “A Life of Learning,” 5.

¹⁵Gay, “The Enlightenment in the History of Political Theory,” 379.

¹⁶For Gay’s criticism of the notion of “secular religion,” specifically as applied to the French Revolution, see his “Rhetoric and Politics in the French Revolution,” *American Historical Review* 66, no. 3 (1961): 664–76.

¹⁷Here, as elsewhere, Gay was deeply influenced by Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* [1932], trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951). On the distinction between seventeenth-century rationalism and the pronounced empiricism of the *philosophes* (with Kant, of course, providing the necessary synthesis), see pp. 93–133.

¹⁸Gay, “A Life of Learning,” 5.

¹⁹Peter Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics: The Poet as Realist* [1959], 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), xiii. The book’s dedication reads: “To the Memory of Franz Neumann: *Aufklärer*.”

history, which made ideas the unit of analysis and traced them across time as they passed from one great thinker to the next, and, on the other hand, the type of intellectual history that focused on cultural tropes and clichés—what he called “the career of second-class ideas in second-class minds.”²⁰ Gay’s form of intellectual history, by contrast, was guided by the principle that “ideas have many dimensions”: “They are expressed by individuals, but they are social products; they are conceived, elaborated and modified amid a specific set of historical circumstances... Therefore, the social historian of ideas cannot rest content with analyzing their formal logical structure.”²¹ For Gay, the advantage of this approach was that it helped unravel some of the more problematic aspects of the Enlightenment, such as Denis Diderot’s sexual libertinism (which could be seen as a way of attacking the Catholic Church), Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract* (not just a work of political theory, but a proposal to reform the Genevan city-state), and Voltaire’s antisemitism, which Gay explained (away) as both a product of his day and as an indirect means of attacking the true infamy, i.e., Christianity.

For Gay’s critics, however, the “social history of ideas” fell well short of its promise. Some historians, notably Robert Darnton, argued that he had failed to provide a genuine “social history” of ideas, since he confined his study to well-known figures like Rousseau and Voltaire and ignored the salons, coffee houses, masonic lodges, and printing presses (legal and clandestine) through which Enlightenment ideas reached the public.²² Other historians missed the sort of rich linguistic contextualism associated with Reinhart Koselleck and Quentin Skinner, or the attention to national, regional, or religious particularities that has come to be associated with the work of Roy Porter and David Sorkin. Even Gay would later admit that he would have been better off with a different name for his approach. In any case, he eventually dropped the term *social history of ideas* from his scholarly vocabulary as he made the shift to cultural history.

That was not before Gay had published his two-volume magnum opus *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (1966–1969).²³ In this work he insisted on the coherence and unity of the Enlightenment:

There were many philosophes in the eighteenth century, but there was only one Enlightenment. A loose, informal, wholly unorganized coalition of cultural critics, religious skeptics and political reformers from Edinburgh to Naples, Paris to Berlin, Boston to Philadelphia, the philosophes made up a clamorous chorus, and there were some discordant voices among them, but what is striking is their general harmony, not their occasional discord. The men of the Enlightenment united on a vastly ambitious program, a program of secularism, humanity, cosmopolitanism, and freedom, above all.²⁴

²⁰Peter Gay, *The Party of Humanity: Essays in the French Enlightenment* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1964), x. In referring to an intellectual history focused on “cultural clichés,” Gay may have had in mind the work of Richard Hofstadter (e.g., *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* [New York: Knopf, 1963]). For a later (slightly different) formulation of the “social history of ideas,” with greater emphasis on its contrast with Marxist approaches, see Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics*, 2nd ed., xiv–xv.

²¹Gay, *The Party of Humanity*, x.

²²See esp. Robert Darnton, “The Social History of Ideas,” in *The Kiss of Lamourette* (New York: Norton, 1990), 219–52.

²³Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. 1, *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Norton, 1966), vol. 2, *The Science of Humanity* (New York: Norton, 1969).

²⁴Gay, *The Enlightenment*, vol. 1, 3.

In Gay's reading, this program consisted of two key moments that related to each other dialectically: the recovery of classical antiquity and the formation of modernity.

The Rise of Modern Paganism (1966), the first of Gay's two volumes, describes the first of these moments. Gay argued that the philosophes were "modern pagans," not just in the sense that they had sought to recover the heritage of classicism but also (and especially) because they had been irredeemably hostile to organized religion—and Christianity in particular. Theirs was not the pious antiquity of Homer or even Plato but instead the skeptical, irreligious antiquity of Lucretius. A "single passion" bound the philosophes together, which was "the passion to cure the spiritual malady that is religion, the germ of ignorance, barbarity, hypocrisy, filth, and the basest self-hatred."²⁵ This was a reading of the Enlightenment that placed Voltaire and his campaign to "crush the infamy" front and center, while marginalizing the German *Aufklärer*, whom Gay deemed "isolated, impotent, and almost wholly unpolitical."²⁶ But the final way station in this history was neither Voltaire's deism nor Holbach's dogmatic atheism, but rather the skeptical atheism of David Hume, "the complete modern pagan." In Gay's vision, the Enlightenment was not strictly that of an eighteenth-century movement. Instead, he saw it as one—though crucial—moment in an ongoing struggle between myth and reason that had begun in the ancient world and that persisted into the present.²⁷ The narrative of *The Birth of Modern Paganism* corresponded to that vision, as Gay ranged across two thousand years of intellectual history in a dazzling display of erudition.

The Science of Freedom (1969) was only slightly more modest in scope: it described the philosophes' "pursuit of modernity" in a wide variety of areas, including aesthetics, economics, education, and politics, but largely confined itself to eighteenth-century Europe. More controversial was the book's final section, "The Program in Practice," which presented the American experiment in democracy as a natural outcome of the Enlightenment, both in its commitment to free expression and toleration, and in its adherence to ancient republican ideals. For subsequent critics, Gay's apparent identification of the Enlightenment with American modernity was evidence of the Cold War logic underpinning his scholarship.²⁸ Yet, Gay's narrative could also be seen as figuring his own personal journey from (German) persecution to (American) freedom, as well as an attempt to bind U.S. history to the cosmopolitan and secular values of the Enlightenment.

While working on his two-volume study of the Enlightenment, Gay found time to write and publish *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (1968), a short book that remains one of the most influential studies of this topic.²⁹ Unlike most of his previous scholarship, the writing of this book put Gay in direct touch with the intellectual world of his youth. Years later he would insist that, while the basic interpretation put forth in *Weimar Culture* was accurate, "an unmistakable air of mourning hangs over it."³⁰ The book begins with a listing of the many prominent scholars, artists, and writers from this era who were forced into exile by the rise of the Nazis and the subsequent destruction of the Weimar

²⁵Ibid., 373.

²⁶Ibid., 4.

²⁷See, in this context, Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1946).

²⁸For this argument, see Annelien de Dijn, "The Politics of the Enlightenment: From Peter Gay to Jonathan Israel," *Historical Journal* 55, no. 3 (2012): 785–805.

²⁹Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

³⁰Gay, *My German Question*, 200.

Republic, a disaster that not only colored later views of the era but that seemed to have been anticipated well before 1933: “The excitement that characterized Weimar culture stemmed in part from exuberant creativity and experimentation; but much of it was anxiety, fear, a rising sense of doom. [It] was a precarious glory, a dance on the edge of a volcano. Weimar culture was the creation of outsiders, propelled by history into the inside, for a short, dizzying, fragile moment.”³¹

Gay embedded his interpretation of Weimar culture as the creation of “outsiders” thrust to the “inside” within a narrative of Oedipal revolt that, in typical Freudian manner, resisted any clear identification with the sons or the fathers. To be sure, he did not hesitate to condemn what he saw as the more baleful aspects of Weimar culture, such as Heideggerian philosophy, the nationalist-tinted revivals of Heinrich von Kleist and Friedrich Hölderlin, and the longing for authority that came to the fore after 1930. But while he praised the creative energies behind Expressionism, he saw it as “revolutionary without being political” and “compatible with all sorts of politics,” including that of the far right.³² Gay also displayed impatience with the dithering of *Vernunftrepublikaner* like Thomas Mann, who confessed that, in his heart, he was no Settembrini, the embodiment of liberal rationalism in *Der Zauberberg* (1924). “Yet what Weimar needed,” Gay averred, “was more Settembrinis—perhaps a little less naïve and a little more laconic—liberals wholly disenchanted with political myths and metaphysical *Schwärmerei*.”³³ In fact, Gay wrote most affectionately about those few institutions that seemed to be bastions of vigorous criticism and reasoned inquiry, such as the German Academy for Politics, the Psychoanalytical Institute in Berlin, and the Warburg Institute, the intellectual home of Gay’s idol Ernst Cassirer. Gay wrote less affectionately about the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, characterizing it as “left-Hegelian to the core” and far more influential abroad than it ever was in Germany.³⁴ In the end, of course, this was to be the fate of a great deal of Weimar culture, many of whose major figures withdrew into “inner emigration,” died in concentration camps, or took their own lives. The “true home” of the Weimar spirit, Gay made clear, was not Germany but “in exile.”³⁵

In 1969, Gay left Columbia to join the Department of History at Yale University. Once at Yale, Gay began formal training as an analyst at the Western New England Institute for Psychoanalysis in New Haven.³⁶ It was at this time that his scholarly interests turned in two new directions. On the one hand, he wrote two studies dealing with questions of historiography: *Style in History* (1974) and *Art and Act: On Causes in History—Manet, Gropius, Mondrian* (1976).³⁷ At the same time, he began working on a cultural history of the German Empire. Although he never completed this latter project, he published some of the initial studies for it in *Freud, Jews and Other Germans: Masters and Victims in Modernist Culture* (1978). This book, he wrote in the preface, “is a piece of autobiography, part of

³¹ Gay, *Weimar Culture*, xiv.

³² *Ibid.*, 103, 105.

³³ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁶ Gay, “A Life of Learning,” 7.

³⁷ Peter Gay, *Style in Art* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); *idem*, *Art and Act: On Causes in History—Manet, Gropius, Mondrian* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

reckoning with my origins and my changing life's experience."³⁸ Gay argued that such subjective experience could provide the ground for historical insight and even objectivity. Objective or not, the essays in this volume are among the most powerful and personal that Gay ever wrote, particularly three set pieces that depict encounters between artists and critics, masters and disciples, Jews and "Aryans" that unfolded in the shadow of musical Wagnerism. "Hermann Levi: A Study in Service and Self-Hatred" paints a haunting portrait of Richard Wagner's conductor Hermann Levi, who labored faithfully for years on behalf of his master, despite being subjected to repeated antisemitic insults and animus from members of the Bayreuth circle. In "Aimez-Vous Brahms? On Polarities in Modernism," Gay makes a case for Johannes Brahms as a modernist, rejecting the notion (associated with Wagner) that modernist music must be difficult, obscure, and hard to enjoy. Finally, "For Beckmesser: Eduard Hanslick as Victim and Prophet" provides a defense of the "conservative" music critic (and anti-Wagnerite) Hanslick, who was attacked in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* via the character of Beckmesser. For all the strengths of these essays, Gay admitted that it had been "painful... to dwell on some of these matters," which might explain why his cultural history of the *Kaiserreich* remained a series of fragments.³⁹

Freud, Jews and Other Germans may have marked an endpoint in Gay's engagement with "German" cultural history, but it signaled the beginning of a decade of intensive scholarly engagement with the life and thought of Freud. The essay, "Sigmund Freud: A German and His Discontents," from that volume was followed by *Freud for Historians* (1985), *A Godless Jew: Freud, Atheism, and the Making of Psychoanalysis* (1987), *Reading Freud: Explorations and Entertainments* (1990), and the massive biography, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (1988), which was translated into seven languages.⁴⁰ Just as Gay had constructed his image of the philosophes, to some degree, on the model of Freud, he now made the case for Freud as the "last philosophe," the investigator who had broken through to that science of the human that had been the goal of the Enlightenment.⁴¹ Gay was insistent, just as Freud had been, that psychoanalysis was a science, grounded in empirical evidence with its results subject to revision. As a more or less orthodox Freudian, Gay had little use for branches of psychoanalysis that deviated from Freudian ego psychology, much less for those (like Jacques Lacan) who fused it with structuralist linguistics and Hegelian philosophy. Above all, he insisted—just as he had twenty years earlier with regard to the Enlightenment—that psychoanalysis did not constitute a "worldview," a "faith," or a "religion." Indeed, Freud saw religion as the enemy, an illusion to be combatted, and if he reserved special hostility for Roman Catholicism (this was a man who had named a son after Oliver Cromwell), in the end, it was only "the worst of a bad lot."⁴² Nor was Freud's animus against religion merely a personality quirk, a crusade that diverted him from

³⁸Peter Gay, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans: Masters and Victims in Modernist Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), xiv.

³⁹*Ibid.* Another factor may have been Gay's desire to avoid becoming ensnared in the *Sonderweg* question, which seemed to loom over his early plans for a cultural history of the German empire. For evidence of this, see esp. Gay, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans*, 1–28.

⁴⁰Peter Gay, *Freud for Historians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); *idem*, *A Godless Jew: Freud, Atheism, and the Making of Psychoanalysis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); *idem*, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: Norton, 1988); *idem*, *Reading Freud: Explorations and Entertainments* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁴¹See esp. Gay, *A Godless Jew*, 35–68.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 59–60.

science. In Gay's view, Freud would never have come upon the science of psychoanalysis had he been anything but an uncompromising atheist.

Gay's insistence on Freud's status as an empirically grounded scientist put him at odds with those scholars who sought the roots of psychoanalysis in the artistic and political climate of Vienna, notably Carl Schorske, whose celebrated interpretation of Freud he dismissed as "eccentric."⁴³ If there was a cultural context for Freud's thought, Gay suggested, it was not defined by his physical surroundings but rather by the books he had read (Goethe, Shakespeare) and the art he collected (notably reproductions of classical sculptures), all of which reflected established canons of German bourgeois taste, as well as by his contacts with scientists and intellectuals at home and abroad: "Freud," Gay insisted, "lived far less in Austrian Vienna than in his own mind."⁴⁴ As to possible connections between Freud's status as a Jew and his discovery of psychoanalysis, Gay was similarly skeptical. In his reading, Freud was thoroughly secular in his upbringing and outlook and had resisted even well meaning attempts to label psychoanalysis a "Jewish science" or a form of Jewish mysticism. Yet, Freud did perceive a "Semitic" racial quality in himself. Moreover, he suggested that his outsider status as a Jew had made him better able to accept the difficult truths of psychoanalysis than a gentile might have been. Gay, however, was having none of this. As counterevidence, he cited the example of Charles Darwin, an atheist but an insider just as capable as Freud of producing a revolutionary and disturbing scientific theory.

Not all readers were convinced by Gay's arguments. A number of reviewers criticized *Freud: A Life for Our Time* as an "insider's biography" that was too committed to a narrowly orthodox interpretation of Freud to succeed as a work of historical reconstruction.⁴⁵ Gay was arguably more successful in his attention to Freud's emotional life, including his relationships with family members and the impact of various traumas on his overweening desire for success. Here Gay turned the tools of psychoanalysis on its founder, and if most of his analyses followed paths suggested by Freud himself, they nonetheless gave his narrative a psychological depth not found in previous biographies.

By the time the Freud biography appeared in print, Gay had already embarked on another hugely ambitious project: his five-volume study, *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*. Gay had taken note of the rise of social history in the 1970s and the proliferation of detailed studies of peasant and working-class life, and he was convinced that the middle classes were in need of similar attention, particularly given what he saw as misconceptions about the bourgeoisie as narrow, repressed, and philistine.⁴⁶ In this regard, his project paralleled the large projects on *Bürgertumsforschung* initiated by Jürgen Kocka and Lothar Gall around the same time. The difference was that Gay conceived his project as "history informed by psychoanalysis," an approach he defended, in depth, in *Freud for Historians*. This was not the old psycho-history, he insisted, which was characterized by a "historical reductionism" that explained the

⁴³ Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Times*, 747. See Carl Schorske, "Politics and Patricide in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*," *American Historical Review* 78, no. 2 (1973): 328–47; idem, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 181–207.

⁴⁴ Gay, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans*, 33.

⁴⁵ See, in particular, the devastating critique by John E. Toews, "Historicizing Psychoanalysis: Freud in His Time and for Our Time," *Journal of Modern History* 63, no. 4 (1991): 504–45, including the description of Gay's book as an "insider's biography" (p. 507).

⁴⁶ Gay, *A Life of Learning*, 15–17.

Reformation on the basis of Luther's unresolved Oedipal conflict with his father.⁴⁷ Instead, Gay used the psychoanalytical theory of the drives—love, aggression, conflict—to analyze the bourgeoisie as a whole. Thus the first two volumes, *Education of the Senses* (1984) and *The Tender Passion* (1986), explored the linked themes of sexuality and love, while *The Cultivation of Hatred* (1993) examined the role of aggression and *The Naked Heart* (1995) the development of inwardness.⁴⁸ (The final volume, *Pleasure Wars* [1998], fit less easily into this scheme, since it dealt primarily with the complicated relationship between the bourgeoisie and the aesthetic avant-garde.⁴⁹) Another way in which Gay's *Bourgeois Experience* departed from similar studies was its coverage of not only Britain, France, and Germany, but also the United States, which offered evidence of bourgeois life "at its purest or, perhaps better, at the edge of its destined future."⁵⁰ Indeed, the manuscripts division of the Yale Library provided Gay with one of his crown pieces of evidence: the diary of Mabel Loomis Todd, which recounted her sexual experiences (and evident pleasure in them) in considerable detail. For Gay, this and similar testimony showed that the Victorian middle classes—not just men but also women—took pleasure in sex, giving the lie to claims to the contrary by the Victorians themselves and by later generations of historians.

The five volumes of *The Bourgeois Experience* received mixed reviews. Readers marveled at the vast number of topics Gay managed to incorporate into these books. This was not just intellectual history but a cultural history that sought to capture almost everything relevant to the lived experience of the nineteenth-century middle classes: university duels, professionalization, advice books, women's education, humor, sports—again, almost everything. Moreover, even as Gay sought to generalize about the "bourgeois experience" as a whole, he was well attuned to the many shades of difference within it. What many critics missed, however, were fresh and original arguments. Too often, it seemed, Gay was attacking positions that had been overrun years earlier; too predictably, he marshaled evidence to support a point already made by Freud. In particular, it was claimed, Gay's project suffered from comparison with the work of Michel Foucault, whose influence in the academy was reaching an apex and who had traversed some of the same historical terrain as Gay, notably in his attention to issues of sexuality and his impatience with received pieties about repressed Victorians. But where Gay challenged such views in order to affirm a broader narrative of bourgeois emancipation, Foucault reframed that emancipation as a new form of imprisonment, with Freud the prison warden.⁵¹ Little wonder, then, that Gay had no use for the various waves of theory, whether Foucauldian, Lacanian, or Derridean, that crashed onto American shores in those years.

Gay's near-allergic reaction to philosophical and theoretical speculation was closely tied to his sense of the importance of style in history. His role models were Gibbon, Voltaire,

⁴⁷Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1958). For Gay's animadversions against "reductionism," see Gay, *Freud for Historians*, 184–85.

⁴⁸Peter Gay, *Education of the Senses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); idem, *The Tender Passion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); idem, *The Cultivation of Hatred* (New York: Norton, 1993); idem, *The Naked Heart* (New York: Norton, 1995).

⁴⁹Peter Gay, *Pleasure Wars* (New York: Norton, 1998).

⁵⁰Gay, *Education of the Senses*, 5.

⁵¹In a particularly critical review of *The Cultivation of Hatred*, James R. Kincaid made the comparison explicit: "Gay waves away Michel Foucault and his followers in a bibliographical note, but compared to Foucault's work this volume is very pale indeed, facile and shallow, making one wish that the two historians were not so rudely divided: one has all the note cards and the other all the ideas." See "Victorian's Secret," *The New York Times*, Sept. 5, 1993.

Johan Huizinga, and especially his friend Richard Hofstadter, whose books combined deep erudition with sharp arguments, fluid style, and crackling wit. Like many liberals of his generation (Georg Iggers, Isaiah Berlin), Gay was suspicious of the German historicist tradition, including what he saw as its moral relativism, its cult of the state, and its overall political naiveté. Gay was particularly critical of Friedrich Meinecke, the twentieth century's greatest exemplar of this tradition, both for his political equivocations in the Weimar Republic and for *The German Catastrophe* (1946), where he suggested that post-Nazi Germany could purify itself by establishing Goethe societies in every town and village. Gay's critique of historicism was not just a matter of politics, however; it also concerned the way historians relate to their subjects. Gay tended to see figures like Freud, Bernstein, Voltaire, and Hume as contemporaries, even comrades, in an ongoing struggle between truth and myth, decency and barbarism, that had had its peaks and valleys but was unlikely to end.⁵²

Gay could be bitingly critical of work he disliked or with which he disagreed. Reviewing a book on the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution, he indicated his disdain for the author's "melodramatic" and "reactionary" approach to the topic, which he described as "Talmon for the masses": "This is not to say that [Stanley] Loomis's *Terror* is without value. Doubtless the Book of the Month Club chose it for its real merits."⁵³ To this example could be added many others in which Gay not only attacked his enemies but outright provoked them, inviting them to respond (as they sometimes did) and keep fighting.⁵⁴ Peter Gay shared a *Kampfgeist* with his intellectual heroes that helped propel his work forward. Describing the heated polemics over the Enlightenment, he wrote, "I have had my share in these polemics, especially against the Right, and I must confess that I have enjoyed them."⁵⁵ Less enjoyable, perhaps, was a lengthy polemic against Ernst Nolte (in an incongruous place: the preface to *Freud, Jews and Other Germans*) that anticipated some of the themes of the *Historikerstreit* of the mid-1980s.⁵⁶ And many of his writings on Freud were devoted to defending a particular view of psychoanalysis and its founder. At the same time, Gay's commitment to Freud prepared him to acknowledge the role that emotion, especially anger, played in his own historical writing, just as it had allowed him to identify its role in the intellectual debates of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁵⁷

Despite his standing as a historian of ideas, Gay was wary of intellectual pretense, claims to special insight, and all forms of metaphysics. Ernst Cassirer had first emphasized the break between seventeenth-century rationalism and Enlightenment empiricism, but Gay doubled down on this claim in *The Enlightenment*, repeatedly emphasizing the philosophes' hostility to metaphysical speculation.⁵⁸ And when Gay described the Frankfurt School in *Weimar Culture* as "left Hegelian to the core," this was not meant as a term of endearment.

⁵²There were heroes in this struggle and there were also villains. A graduate student at Yale once described how Gay had reacted angrily to a passage in his seminar paper, not because his analysis was weak or his research poor, but because Gay so disliked a quote in it from Thomas Carlyle.

⁵³Peter Gay, "The Deluge," *New York Review of Books*, March 19, 1964.

⁵⁴See, e.g., his response to a review essay by Michael Ignatieff, in "The Jewish Freud," *New York Review of Books*, June 12, 1986.

⁵⁵Gay, *The Rise of Modern Paganism*, ix.

⁵⁶Gay, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans*, xi–xiv.

⁵⁷See esp. *ibid.*, ix, on the role of counter-transference in the writing of modern German history.

⁵⁸Whereas Cassirer presents Kant as the philosopher who synthesized the Enlightenment traditions of rationalism and empiricism, Kant plays almost no role in *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, which presents the story as largely complete by the end of the 1770s—just in time for the American Revolution.

Indeed, whereas Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno were wary of American popular culture, Gay embraced it in all of its forms, from Glenn Miller and Artie Shaw in the 1940s to *Beavis and Butthead* in the 1990s.⁵⁹ Those tastes bled over into his scholarship—for example, in his attention to the power of humor.⁶⁰ In his short biography of Mozart, for instance, Gay devoted a number of pages to the composer's scatological jokes.⁶¹ To be sure, Freud had emphasized the importance of humor as a key to the unconscious, but, even beyond their interpretive value, Gay took obvious delight in quoting Mozart's dirty verses verbatim.

Although he was showered with academic distinctions throughout his career, Gay resisted several traditions of academe. One of these was the footnote, which appeared less and less frequently in his writings. Part of this was a matter of economy—the writing goes faster when one does not cite every relevant secondary source. But another factor may have been Gay's impatience with the minutiae of historiographical debate. In later life, he only rarely spoke at academic conferences or published in academic journals; his preferred venues were instead *The New York Review of Books* and *The New York Times*. He was friends not just with professors but also with editors of trade presses and writers for *The New Yorker*. Gay took note of new books in history and other fields, incorporating them into his broad arguments, but new scholarship rarely moved him to rethink a fundamental approach to a historical problem. For much of his career, Gay moved in a realm outside of and, to some extent, beyond the academy. As much as was possible, given his set of interests, he was a public intellectual.

Gay's graduate courses at Yale had an atmosphere more of the salon than of the seminar. Students typically gathered at his home for a conversation that flowed freely, that was formless at times, but that left no doubt where Gay stood on things. As a doctoral advisor, Gay's approach was typically hands-off—until he was presented with a finished chapter, at which point he provided extensive comments, particularly on matters of style. Meetings usually took place not in his office but at Yorkside Pizza and Restaurant in New Haven, where he invariably ordered a tuna fish grinder with cheese. In the end, Gay was not looking for “students” so much as colleagues, friends, allies in the party of humanity. Those who worked with him came to cherish that moment, typically after oral exams, when he asked them to call him by his first name. On the weekend I received my doctorate, Peter and Ruth Gay invited my family to their home for a small reception, even though I was not formally his advisee. It was an act of generosity I will never forget.

After retiring from Yale, Gay took a position as the founding director of the Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library, a position he held from 1997 to 2003. During these years, he completed the final volume of *The Bourgeois Experience*, as well as *Mozart* (1999), *Schnitzler's Century: The Making of Middle Class Culture, 1815–1914* (2002), and *Savage Reprisals: Bleak House, Madame Bovary, Buddenbrooks* (2002).⁶² Gay's most celebrated work from these years was, far and away, his memoir, *My German Question: Growing Up in Nazi Berlin* (1998), in which he recounted the story of his family's exodus

⁵⁹Gay, *My German Question*, 203. Gay told me that he had seen and enjoyed the movie *Beavis and Butthead Do America* (1996). (For the record, so did I.)

⁶⁰See the extended discussion in Gay, *The Cultivation of Hatred*, 368–423.

⁶¹Peter Gay, *Mozart: A Life* (New York: Viking, 1999), 30–31, 35–37.

⁶²Peter Gay, *Schnitzler's Century: The Making of Middle-Class Culture, 1815–1914* (New York: Norton, 2002); idem, *Savage Reprisals: Bleak House, Madame Bovary, Buddenbrooks* (New York: Norton, 2002).

from Germany to the United States. Dedicated to Emil Busse, the gentile friend who had taken care of his family's valuables and hid Moritz Fröhlich during Kristallnacht, this book represented Gay's attempt to recalibrate his complicated relationship with Germany, which had evolved over the decades from outright hatred into something more ambivalent, thanks in large part to his friendships with individual Germans (his relationship with Karl Dietrich Bracher was particularly important). Gay also used the book to express his frustrations with those who questioned why Germany's Jews had not tried to leave much earlier than 1938 or who suggested, as had Gershom Scholem, that the idea of a German-Jewish symbiosis had been a lie from the start: "And you still thought, after the Nürnberg Laws and other horrors, that you were Germans?" But we *were* Germans: the gangsters who had taken control of the country were not Germany, *we were*.⁶³ Conversely, Gay's family refused to accept the Jewish identity being imposed on them by the Nazi regime: "Their definition of our race was just another lie that we repudiated as unhistorical and unscientific... Whatever our pious fellow-pariahs might say, we could not make ourselves believe what we did not believe."⁶⁴ And yet, in the end, Gay's family *was* forced to accept a Jewish identity, if only to separate themselves from a Germany that had rejected them. *My German Question* was awarded the Geschwister-Scholl-Preis in 1999. In his acceptance speech, Gay noted that, even fifty years after the Holocaust, it was still necessary to speak of "Germans" and "Jews" as mutually exclusive categories and that much had to be done before one could speak of "normal relations" between the two. Still, he affirmed that this task was part of the "work of civilization" and, as such, could not be neglected, much less abandoned.⁶⁵

Gay's wife Ruth died in 2006 after a long illness. Although without formal training, she had established herself as a distinguished scholar in the field of Jewish history. In addition, she had always been Peter Gay's first and best editor, making each of his works since the 1960s "almost a joint affair," as he wrote after her death.⁶⁶ Now writing largely alone, he was still able to complete *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy* (2008), which examined the history of that artistic impulse from its beginnings in the writings of Charles Baudelaire and Gustave Flaubert until its "death" at the hands of Andy Warhol's pop art.

Modernism was Gay's twenty-sixth book. Years earlier, he had described Freud's enormous scholarly output, which he was able to sustain even after establishing a psychoanalytic practice that required him to spend ten hours a day with patients. Such continued productivity was possible because Freud was willing, even eager, to write late into the night, over the weekend, and while on holiday. "However sincere his professions of indifference to the world, however serious his contention that one writes principally to satisfy an inner need... his urge to communicate those theories to others agitated him from the beginning. It remained alive to the end."⁶⁷ Gay could have said the same of himself. Over the course of a long career, he established his expertise across three centuries of European cultural and intellectual history, an exceedingly rare achievement even in an era more committed to generalist knowledge than the present one. But driving Gay's scholarship was not just a desire for

⁶³ Gay, *My German Question*, 111–12.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁶⁵ "Peter Gays Münchner Rede im Wortlaut," *Spiegel-Online*, Nov. 24, 1999 (<http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/subtil-peter-gays-muenchner-rede-im-wortlaut-a-53752.html>).

⁶⁶ Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy from Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (New York: Norton, 2008), 565.

⁶⁷ Gay, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans*, 52.

knowledge but an “urge to communicate,” to put right what others had supposedly gotten wrong, to replace myth with fact, to contain dangerous delusions, to reward courage and honesty, and to contribute in this way to the “science of freedom.”

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